

The National Defence Council, summoned today in Kadriorg by the President, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, focused on the general interpretation of national defence, and they discussed Estonia's military contribution to the Central African Republic at length.

A more general interpretation of national defence was adopted by the Government back in 2010 in the National Defence Strategy and this is also mentioned in the current government coalition agreement: "The general approach to national defence, as provided in the National Defence Strategy, will serve as the basis for national defence development. We will ensure the readiness of all state authorities in the event of possible threats and will ensure the development of military defence in line with the development of the rest of society."

The non-military component of the national defence development plan was completed of last December and is currently being approved.

"Therefore – strategic documents establish the right principles; some authorities have also entered into practical agreements of co-operation. But these agreements are not co-ordinated sufficiently at national level or organised to meet the everyday requirements," stated President Ilves. He also said that our ministries lack the understanding that most state authorities have a role to play for the purposes of national defence and mandatory functions to be performed in war time, peace time and times of crisis.

"National defence is more than just an army. National defence is more than defending our country, and employing military tools. The Republic of Estonia has a number of vulnerabilities, including psychological defence, uninterrupted vital services – communications, for example," President Ilves told. He described the opinion that national defence related activities will only be needed in the event of a military conflict as wrong, as "many of these activities are also essential for the normal functioning of a state in a case of a crisis, described by an intensity higher than the average, that we can easily suffer from when hit with a combination of a massive cyber attack, mass disturbances and natural disaster. The country must remain operable in situations like that."

The Head of State emphasised that a country that operates well in any situation of crisis is the best form of intimidation, and he recommended organising strategic training for both the Government and leading civil servants in the near future to understand how to act in situations

of crisis with different intensity. "Paperwork is not worth much without practical training," President Ilves stated.

The National Defence Council also discussed the participation of an Estonian Defence Force unit in the Central African Republic (CAR) with France, which will be soon discussed by the Parliament at the proposal of the Government.

It was reiterated, during the discussion, that the CAR is still teetering on the verge of a civil war and the powers of the military forces of France and the African Union are insufficient to secure the population. The European Union is planning a mission and the Security Council of the UN will soon be discussing the renewal and extension of the current resolution.

"It is the issue of our international sense of responsibility for Estonia not to remain an observer while our allies are asking for our assistance. France is one of the most capable military forces in today's Europe, a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN, and a key country in the European Union and NATO," told President Ilves.

He emphasised the need for the ministries of defence and foreign affairs to explain to the public in general and Parliament the reasons behind the possible participation of our defence force members in the operation in the CAR, including both the threats and the preparations of the soldiers for that mission.

"The professional preparation of the Defence Force unit is highly important to help manage many of the accompanying risks at home," President Ilves said.

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